



## **MEDIA CAMPAIGN**

The biggest goal of Arson Awareness Week is to focus public attention on one severe national problem that contributes to arson. The life safety and property exposure hazard created by unsecured vacant buildings in our cities and towns is as obvious as it is urgent. We've seen this issue swept under the rug for far too long. It's time now to act.

### **Your leadership role is critical**

We need to get this story into the media everywhere there is an arson prone vacant building. Happily, this is the type of story that has immense media appeal because it contains strong visual images and the possibility of a solution. We have put together a strategy that will enable you to get this story "on the air" and "in print" in your area.

This year, for the first time in history, the two most prominent organizations dealing with fire and arson will team up to take this program higher than its ever gone before. In the media kit there is a list of IAAI/IASIU state leaders. We urge you, as a first step, to call your counterpart to discuss a preliminary strategy based on these points.

### **Preliminary Strategy**

- Identify the major media outlets in your area particularly a television station and a daily newspaper.
- Identify the community closest to the media outlets with the most obvious vacant building problem.
- Call the municipal fire department and ask to speak with the Fire Prevention Officer or Fire Chief. Set an appointment where both of you, if possible, can meet with him/her to discuss implementing this program. Provide several posters. The threat of vacant buildings and fire is most extreme to firefighters. It is safe to say every firefighter in this country knows what happened in Worcester. The fire service will support this initiative because it goes to the heart of firefighters safety and fire prevention.
- Consider involving IAAI/IASIU members who live or work in the community to help make connections and get results.
- The Fire Prevention Officer and Fire Chief usually are on a first name basis with broadcast media and print reporters covering fires and other emergencies. The best way to access the media is by interesting these reporters who in turn will help sell the story to their editor.
- The most effective messenger you have for this issue is the fire service itself. If the fire chief or other department member agrees to be the spokesperson for these media event's you have just scored a major victory. See if you can arrange to get an engine or pump company to bring apparatus to the scene of the interviews to pose as a backdrop and also to

provide possible additional interviews with line fighters about their opinion on dangerous buildings and their job.

- Select a building already taken by the city for taxes to avoid issues with any derelict building owner. The main point of this campaign is that these buildings are dangerous, not which building you chose, to illustrate the point.
- Gather statistics about how many vacant buildings there are in the local area and how many fires have occurred in these. These can be easily obtained through the City Engineer or Building Inspector's Office or the community's newspaper. Highlight local conditions to the local media.

With the fire service, explain that the National Arson Awareness Week Program is the opening round of a three-prong attack on the U.S. vacant building problem. The second prong is a web based "tool kit" funded by a FEMA grant scheduled for release this summer. IAAI, IASIU and fire service members are directly involved in its creation. The toolkit will contain technical information and resources for securing dangerous buildings. The third prong is the National Arson Forum scheduled for late fall 2001.

Here, the major players concerned with fire; the fire service, State Fire Marshals, the insurance industry and our elected representatives will come together in Washington, D.C. to learn about successful model vacant building mitigation programs and to support a consensus resolution that will be delivered to Congress and the state legislatures.

The impact of this campaign hinges on public support and political pressure to change. The importance of your part in this cannot be overemphasized. Here are some ideas on getting this issue out to the public.

## **SUGGESTIONS FOR GETTING "AIR/PRINT"**

### **1. Staging a "Media Event"**

- Walk the reporter/film crew through a derelict vacant building containing old furniture, trash, cardboard boxes and other easily ignitable materials. Explain the obvious – anyone from a small child to a mentally ill person with a match could set that building on fire. Here are some other points you could make:
- Show how easy the building can be entered by simply walking through an unlocked door or pulling a piece of cheap pressboard off a window.
- Explain how open stairwells, holes in ceilings, holes in plaster/drywall allow the fire to get to structural framing and increase the likelihood of early collapse.
- Show evidence of vandalism, theft of building components and broken windows. Explain these will increase the rate of fire spread while at the same time weakening the building.
- Point out that if the building is close to other structures a conflagration could easily develop because there is no one inside the vacant buildings to report small fires and, as a result, they often go out of control.
- Emphasize firefighters are three times as likely to be injured fighting a vacant building fire as an ordinary structure fire and that seventy percent of the fires in such buildings are classified incendiary or suspicious in national fire statistics.

- Point out evidence of criminal activity such as drug paraphernalia, evidence of trespass with sleeping or cooking materials and “urban mining” (stealing plumbing fixtures, copper pipe, mantle pieces, etc). Show unsanitary conditions and evidence of rodents & insects. Emphasize the effect on the neighborhood through interviews of people living nearby.

## 2. Demonstration

Demonstrate how to effectively board-up a vacant building so that it is virtually impossible to enter. The pamphlet in the media kit entitled “Board Up Procedures” shows how to mothball a building so its risk of catching fire is virtually zero. This same procedure has proven effective in the toughest cities in this country. It works, and can be demonstrated and explained with minimum effort by simply following the directions.

## 3. Show Poster

Show the Arson Awareness Week poster and provide details about the scope of the vacant building threat from “The National Vacant/Abandoned Building Fire Problem” fact sheet in the media kit.

## 4. Show Evaluation Form Being Used

Show an inspector using the “Vacant/Abandoned Building Evaluation Form” to access deteriorated features of a vacant building.

## 5. Explain Building Hazards

Have a firefighter explain problems with the building (holes in floors, missing staircases, etc) that could be deadly to local firefighters in the event of a fire.

## 6. Involve Fire Departments

Have an engine fire company pull up to a vacant building and check it for security. Another idea would be for the fire company to report a newly vacant building to the city code inspector to be added to the inventory of distressed properties.

